THE PORTAL

by Bob Allisat

After that blast of criticism the lecture theatre was silent for a moment . Doctor Moon at the lectern seemed to rock back a little as the words were hurled at him. Front row, centre, fingers spread and held lightly together (think spider doing pushups on a mirror) - arch rival and nemesis Doctor Lannigan sat, smiling a fox smile after her hopefully lethal delivery.

Doctor Moon opened his mouth as if to speak. Closed it. Then yawned. Only to open his mouth and speak again.

“Well *I* think it’s not just a good idea. But a GREAT idea. One that could revolutionize civilization. Just imagine... finally, a simple, quick and painless way to cure virtually all of society’s problems! It’s entirely voluntary! Free for any citizen! And, while the energy cost to maintain the Portal are high. Very high indeed – I mean the generation of a plasma gateway is enormous – the benefits vastly outweigh associated costs. Win – win – win!”

The room was silent for a moment. And then it exploded in cheers and applause – even a few whoops and whistles! Doctor Lannigan snapped her laptop shut, rose, turned to look at the crowd of alleged (that was the look on her face) – alleged fellow scientists in disgust, and strode out of the room,

head held high. The only voice of opposition to the presumed Portalic tide - vanquished! Crushed! This is Sparta-ed! Like they say: you may not like that the tide will rise. That doesn't mean it won't happen anyways.

Doctor Moon – resplendent in his customary whitewhite full length lab coat – his roundround face and wire frame granny glasses glinting in the light of victory – soaked it all in. Fifteen years of research and quiet promotion. Culminating in this presentation to the third of his "International Conference on Science Society Nexus" – IconS Son.

There was growing government and public interest in the good Doctor Moon's work and agenda. Evidenced by the second row presence of one Henry Tennant, chief science writer for the illustrious New York Times. Who had been ghosting Doctor Moon for some days. Embedded to write a major piece on a fringe movement that appeared rapidly gaining real life momentum.

Soon the crowd dimmed to Doctor Moon, his assistant Winnie Nelson and a few true believers and co-investigators. Henry tapped the last few words of his notes on the events of the last two hours. Cleared his throat – that stopped the murrmur of talk on the dias – and stood up. "Doctor Moon, if I may have a few minutes of your time..."

“Of course Harry”

“Henry.”

“Oh gosh, again! I’m so sorry Henry! Give me a moment.”

“Of course.” Henry made his way down the line of seats and up to the edge of the stage. The lights had been turned down by an unseen techie up there in the back. It had a mood of some sterile convention centre amptied of conventioneers, anywhere on Earth. Only scientific.

Dr. Moon had a different vibe. An after the main event one. But before the immediate glow of a wildly successful presentation had quite departed. Yet after the dizzy high of a presumed peak experience. Not at the top anymore but not quite on the way down either.

Doctor Moon shook hands, had words, made arrangements. Accepting an invitation to speak somewhere, sometime next year. Henry took note but took no actual notes. He had decided a few minutes ago that the story would be done. After this final interview.

Doctor Moon smiled his effusive smile as the last hanger on and well wisher departed. Leaving only himself and Winnie. He exchanged a few private

words with her. And then turned to Henry. “Would you like to speak here or somewhere more comfortable?” “How about here. It’s really been an exceptional day don’t you think?”

Moon looked around. He paused and the smile reasserted itself. "That’s an understatment perhaps. Even a year ago there were no more than a dozen people at this conference. And today...”

“Looked like two hundred people.”

“Great! Really great. And from around the world. Even better!”

“I have some further questions. I won’t be long. After this I’ll be heading back to New York. Please can we sit?”

“Super Henry. Super” They sat in the front row. Henry by chance picking the spot where Doctor Lannigan had planted herself. Moon to his left.

“Doctor Moon, first I’d like to record this discussion with your permission. For the podcast.”

“Indeed Henry. No problem”

Henry opened his laptop. He plugged in the microphones, clipping one on his lapel. Handing the other to Moon, who followed his lead. “Thank you

Doctor Moon. I want people to hear your voice not mine."

"I appreciate that Henry. It's been a most interesting experience you being here this week. I never realized how long you people spend on your stories. It's amazing."

"Well, we try to be thorough. And like I said, while I may ask the questions it's you who our readers and listeners are really interested in."

Henry cleared his throat. Again. It was a nervous tick Moon and everyone on Earth but Henry noticed. It was relatively easy to edit out so no-one at the paper brought it up anymore. It seemed totally ingrained and unconscious. Henry removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and opened the interview outline on his laptop. And began...

"Doctor Moon first thank you for letting myself and the readers and listeners of the New York Times Techline podcast into your life. It is most appreciated."

"It's been an interesting experience. I wondered when I woke up if you'd be there in my hotel room!"

Henry laughs. Doctor Moon laughs. "Well if I could have I would have. We try and embed with our subjects but not that way."

They both laugh again. Henry clears his throat. Puts on his glasses. And continues.

“Doctor we’ve gone through all the details, the technology and practicalities. And discussed some of the moral and ethical dilemmas to your Portal. What I would ask, to finish our explorations, what I think your audience really would like is your vision of an actual day at the Portal. What you envision a real time, real life experience day will be like.”

“Henry this is the core of my interest in this technology. The human benefits! The profound and truly joyous prospects for humanity! Imagine – in the not too distant future – individuals, families, communities, governments, all – will be able to humanely and gently, happily and joyously be able to control, to completely control the denouement! Imagine! Solemn and, yes, joyous processions to the Portal.” Moon pauses... looking into the distance, through the white screen at the very front of the room, into infinity it looks.

“And who would make up that procession?”

“Why all kinds of folks. Me and maybe even you. Our family members or friends. Anyone in society – everyone in society.”

“Would you be so kind and be specific?”

“Of course! Let’s say a relative is infirmed. Has been diagnosed with an incurable malady – say cancer or dementia. Instead of the standard, well I’d say more or less... how do I say – well instead of all that it’s a loving ceremony.”

“Flash.” Henry paused. Moon beamed. “My research indicated to me the original idea for the Portal came in New Mexico. In the summer of 2002. Is that accurate?”

“Yes Henry. It was at that White Sands solar generation facility. The problem of streamers. It got me to thinking.”

“Streamers?”

“There were - it has since closed down unfortunately - there were about one thousand mirrors concentrating the sunlight on a small target which generates electricity. Unfortunately avian fauna transgress into the concentrated light causing mortality. Streamers.”

“The birds get fried - burned to death in mid flight.”

“In a flash! Painless. Fast. Tragic. But instructional.”

“And how did you get from there to here?”

“Well what if it was not birds? And if it was truly instantaneous and completely painless? How great

would that be in any number of circumstances? It would be tremendous!”

“To many the idea of incinerating people alive is grotesque and horrific.”

“Not incinerating. Plasma-induction. It happens within a millisecond. Faster than a blink of the eye. Painless. Perfect.”

“Your vision for the Portal is fairly broad. Could you provide specific examples of it’s usefulness?”

“The uses will be multiple and varied. First is the standard, medical end of life applications. This is already well established in society. Only there are no errors or doubts with the Portal. Theses will be the majority of utilizations. Then there are normative practices. Which will also alleviate error factors and the unknown. In cases of judicial intervention the Portal would be humane and without potential errors.”

“You’re talking capital punishment. Replacing lethal injection or other methods with incineration.”

“Plasma-induction. And society condones these practices world wide. This is a way to compassionately accomplish societal goals.”

“You also intimate other uses. Which sound to me a lot like eugenics – eliminating inferior human beings by Portal.”

“No Henry. Not inferior. Not eugenics. All citizens have the choice. And when they and their families make that choice this is the gentle, joyous way to proceed.”

“Dr. Moon, murder is still murder. And suicide is still illegal in most of the world - assisted suicide is also illegal in many places. And - yes I know it’s legal here, where you live - but there is widening resistance. Even here. Resistance against euthanasia for non end of life medical or psychiatric reasons.”

“Widening? I disagree. Support appears to be growing. And the numbers of unassisted passings! The numbers are staggering. And the consequences of failed or bungled or inefficient attempts! Horrendous. I’ve done the research, as you know. So why not simply remove the horror, the taboo, the error. The Portal offers a sane and sensible way out for millions who now take their lives in quite horrendous manners. Places the ultimate power in their and others hands. Imagine – no more nightmare scenes. Even celebrations of life for citizens who self determine.”

“Self-determine. Decide to kill themselves.”

“So to speak. We are all free. This is an undeniable human right – an inalienable civil liberty.”

“That’s debatable Doctor Moon. Many disagree with you."

“Many once thought Doctor assisted end of life was wrong. And now...”

“A very different matter. What you’re talking about is a suicide machine. And what about the issue of involuntary end of life? You seem to advocate a cull of humanity that doesn’t meet some standards of health and perfection.”

“Not at all Henry. When a member of society or their ward decide together that their life is too burdensome, too painful or what have you the decision in my opinion is theirs not ours. Ours is not to judge.”

“So what you see is some line up of people every day and into the night. Where one by one they go into the Portal to be vaporized – ”

“ – Plasma induced – ”

“Okay – to die in a flash. Their relatives and friends driving home, happy and contented that the end was so clear and clean.”

“Yes! Yes. Precisely. And we could station Portalic portals worldwide. The savings in terms of human suffering and grief would be enormous. Not to mention the lands freed up for uses other than burials or interments. The energy savings from futile operations and medical interventions. The medial expenses and human lives injured or lost as collateral damage from unsuccessful life taking endeavors. The list goes on and on. And on.”

Doctor Moon smiled a benevolent smile at Henry Tennant. Tennant, impassive, calm, obviously disturbed by the conversation.

“Doctor Moon, the governments of Sweden and Denmark have Portalic legislation pending consent as we speak. Countries around the world are watching and – you’ve already admitted – are approaching your company now to consult on technical and logistic details. There are significant populations world wide that view your invention as the equivalent of the gas chambers of Nazi Germany or the manner in which dogs and cats were once disposed of in many countries. And that your Portal is no more than gentrified and rationalized mass murder. How do you address these concerns? Concerns I might add many people regard as legitimate and honest.”

“I don’t address them. My role is not to tell people what is right and wrong. I only provide an alternative.

It is up to governments to decide what is legal and illegal – right and wrong. My position is neutral."

"Neutral? Sure doesn't sound neutral to me. Sounds like you're advocate number one."
"These are my personal opinions. You have your personal opinions. Who doesn't? I believe in alternatives. This is one of the alternatives. Others believe otherwise."

"Doctor Moon if someone invents, promotes, sells, installs and operates death machines doesn't that make them a murderer?"

"That's the furthest thing from the truth. The truth is determined by every single human being for themselves. And their governments. My role is to offer an alternative."

"And the alternative is a death machine."

"No. No, no, no. For me it's a life machine. It allows life to the fullest to the very end. No more hopeless pain. No more needless suffering. In a flash."

Henry Tennant clicks the recording session to a close. He removes the microphone from his lapel, Doctor Moon following suit. While packing the microphone away Henry tries to speak a few times. Winne the assistant takes Doctor Moon's whitewhite lab coat and

gives him his black winter overcoat. Again Henry tries to speak. But cannot.

“Well Henry thank you for this interview. Thank you for your time.” Doctor Moon holds out his hand. Henry does not move. He looks at the Doctor. Blank. Void. Turning away. Turning back. Saying the only thing that came to mind...

“Okay. Okay. Not really. But okay.”

Moon, Winnie look at one another. And move to the lecture theatre exit leaving Henry alone. Henry jumped when a voice from somewhere overhead asks

“Sir can I ask you to exit so I can close the venue. I have another lecture to attend shortly.” It’s the techie in the booth that suddenly also goes dark.

Henry looks up, nods and walks towards the door.

Wondering what kind of world this is to allow such things? And how can anyone stop this from happening - if it is still possible?

All the lights go off the moment he opens the doors to the wide university atrium outside. Where a strong sort of ‘school’s closed’ silence pervades the expanse, invading a mind reeling.

END